

Chapter Eleven -- Lonesome Whistle

It was a cold November day that we left Kentucky to move to North Carolina, and we had to drive twenty miles to Cannel City in a jolt wagon before we got to the railroad. The wind blew colder that day than I ever felt it, an' I began tryin' to figure out why it always blows harder in among hills, instead of their bein' any protection.

But first we did something that as far back as I can remember was always the last thing before we started on a journey, or when one of us was going away, or into anything that might mean danger or separation.

When we were ready to start and the wagons were at the door, Father got out the big, black family Bible with all our names in it, and read the Ninety-first Psalm.

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High
shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say of the Lord, he is my refuge and my fortress.
My God; in him will I trust.

Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler,
and from the noisome pestilence.

He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his
wings shalt thou trust. His truth shall be thy shield and
buckler.

Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night, nor for

the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness, nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.....

Then we knelt down, and Father prayed that we might all be kept safe to our journey's end.

I started out with the greatest confidence that the trip would be safe, and perhaps that's the only reason I wasn't scared bodaciously to death, before we got to Cannel City.

The road was narrow and rough, barely wide enough for one team as it wound up and down or along the steep sides of those rugged mountains. When we had to meet another rig, even with the best we could do to pick out a wide place, it was just nip an' tuck whether the one that put two wheels on the upper bank was goin' to upset, an' whether the outside one was goin' to hang to the road without goin' over.

To make things worse, we had a driver named Will Spriggs, who kept tellin' one story after another about people who had been killed when their wagons had gone over the edge.

An' every time we got into a very bad place, or close to the edge of a high cliff, he'd say:

"I shore do hope that there king bolt in this wagon holds. If that king bolt was to break, we'd calavitate right to the bottom o' that hill."

The roads were so bad that twenty miles took us just about all day. But after we got settled down in the train for Winchester, where we were goin' to spend the night, we felt better. It wasn't the first time I'd been on a train, but it was the

first one after I was old enough to remember. There were big, round-wick coal oil lamps, an' the seats were made with straw.

After a while Mother got out the lunch she'd packed, an' we ate chicken an' cake, for it was a special occasion. An' after that, because somehow trains have always made Swetnams want to sing, we struck up a tune.

The first one was a song I've heard ever since, whenever I hear the click of the wheels over the rail joints:

I married me a wife, last Saturday night,

Nickety nackety bow wow wow.

An' I carried her home on a moon-light night,

Bang bang nickabang, nickety nackety bow wow wow.

She combed her hair but once a year,

Nickety nackety bow wow wow.

An' she combed off lice as big as her ear,

Bang bang nickabang, nickety nackety bow wow wow.

She churned her butter in Dad's old boot,

Nickety nackety bow wow wow.

Instead of a dasher she put in her foot,

Bang bang nickabang, nickety nackety bow wow wow.

Then Walter recited me the old poem about another unlucky bridegroom:

When I was a little boy I lived by myself,

And all the bread and cheese I got I put it on the shelf.

The rats and the mice they led me such a life

That I had to go to London to get me a wife.

The roads were so long and the streets were so narrow
 I had to bring my wife home on a wheelbarrow.
 Wheelbarrow broke and my wife got a fall:
 Down came the wheelbarrow, little wife and all.

By that time Father and Ernest had started in singing again,
 this time the lonesome:

If I go to Columbus,
 An' take sick an' die,
 Like a bird into the country
 My spirit would fly.

Go way, ol' man, an' leave me alone,
 For I am a stranger, an' a long way from home.

I'll build me a cabin
 In the mountain so high,
 For to gaze on my true love
 Whene'er she'll pass by.

I'll come back to you, true love,
 When the punkin's in bloom;
 When the mockin' bird's singin',
 In the soft summer gloom.

Go way, ol' man, an' leave me alone.
 For I am a stranger, an' a long way from home.

I was feelin' pretty blue about that time, for I was still a
 little feller, an' I'd been livin' in Kentucky as long as I could

remember. Maybe the others felt that way, too, for somebody struck up an old religious song about a preacher who was leavin' his home.

My dear friends an' brethren, I bid you farewell:
I'm going to travel, to preach the gospel.
I'm going to travel the wilderness through;
Therefore, my dear brethren, I bid you adieu.

With that we got started on religious songs, an' sang "Work, for the Night Is Coming," an' "I'm a Poor, Wayfarin' Stranger," an':

Have you heard of that sun-bright clime,
Undimmed by tears, untouched by time?
Where age hath no power on their fadeless frame,
Where the eye is fire, and the heart a flame.
Have you heard of that sun-bright clime?

It has one of the finest tunes I know, an' after we'd sung it a man came over an' asked Father if he was a preacher. Father said he wasn't, but that Ernest was plannin' to preach. An' he seemed kind of pleased at bein' mistaken for one.

They got to talkin' about travelin', an' the man told a story about one time when he got lost in the mountains, an' stopped to ask the way of a man that was reapin' wheat with a cradle, which is a scythe with a rack to catch the stalks as they fall.

"Could you tell me where I am, please?" he said he asked.

He said the reaper stopped an' thought a bit an' said:

"Well, stranger, I don't know where you are. But I'm in Breathett

County, Kentucky."

Father told about ol' Bill Johnson, who was always quotin' the Bible, but was meaner'n gyarbroth. One time when he'd cheated a pore old feller that had just moved to Blainetown -- cheated him in a horse trade -- Brother Short went to Bill to expostulate.

"Brother Johnson," he said. "You've told me you never do anything but what you can find warrant for in the Bible. Now, I want you to tell me any place in the Bible where it tells you to put up a job like you did on that pore ol' man."

Mr. Johnson looked at him with a perfectly straight face.

"Well," he said, kind of thoughtful, "he was a stranger, an' I took him in."

They talked on for quite a spell, an' I began to get sleepy, for we'd had a mighty hard day, an' it was gettin' late into the evenin'.

About the last thing I can remember was when the man had left, an' the train whistle gave a long, keen, mournful blast, an' Ernest began to sing. The last word of each line was drawn out like a train whistle.

Ol' Reuben had a train,
That run from Cubey into Spain.
You could hear its whistle blow,
Across the sea.

I'm gwine down South,
Where the sun shines in my mouth.
I'm gwine down South,
Can't you see?

That lonesome whistle blow,
Gonna catch that train an' go.
I can't stay here no mo';
It's callin' me.